



Op-Ed: Thinking Inside A New Box: The Coming of the New Age of Mutualism; The End of Another

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The recent announcement by the President on the transfer of responsibility for Afghan society back to the Afghan government, and the new role of U.S. forces as a trainers and advisors in the support of this objective, elicited many reactions from opposing points of view here at home. However, what is missing in the dialog is the recognition of the opportunity that arises from this transition and what the changing nature of the mission presents after 11 years of war.

The United States is coming out of one of the two longest periods of conflict in our history. I say one of two, because Vietnam could be considered the longest, depending upon what date one recognizes as the start of that war. The commonalities of these two periods however, are remarkable. The lessons and opportunities are analogous.

Vietnam began as an advisory mission and escalated into a kinetic fight. Operation ENDURING FREEDOM (OEF) started as kinetic fight and will now cycle down to a training and advisory mission. But the aftermath of this conflict, like the aftermath of Vietnam, gives our Army an opportunity to invest in the future of Landpower.

There are many who will look at the change of mission and the resignation of General (Ret.) Petraeus from the helm of the CIA as an end of an era and a retirement date for “his” counterinsurgency doctrine (COIN). Some will point to the COIN strategy as a failed tactic and reprise a need to refocus on conventional forces.[1] Some will fondly look back at the Cold War and

see a new “comfortable” foe in the Far East. Some will attempt to retain the strategic philosophy of the Rumsfeld era. Actually, the development of Air Sea Battle rings very familiar tones when compared to the development of Air Land Battle, after the end of our Vietnam experience. But it is important that we look forward rather than backward.

The war is over; our troops will return home; it is time to demobilize and reduce the size of the military. There are already calls for the U.S. to “retrench” within the confines of our borders and reduce or eliminate commitments overseas. This is nothing new, for we have reacted similarly after every conflict in our history. However, the proposed reductions in the uniformed forces are not as drastic as the cuts of the 1990’s. After all, the size of the force after the projected reductions will be the same size as that of the force we had to start OEF and Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF); and reducing what we “surged” may not be a bad thing.

We have started out on the right track with our focus on the Profession of Arms Campaign and a retrospective look at how we educate our Soldiers. We are examining closely the effects of extended operations on our Soldier’s mental health and ethical behavior. But there is more. We must scrutinize this environment for its implications for the future. My generation, which entered the Army in the early 1980s, feels comfortable in the certainty of the Fulda Gap and the large tank formations of Operations DESERT SHIELD/DESERT STORM. In some ways, we have forgotten Operations URGENT FURY and JUST CAUSE; humanitarian intervention in Haiti; peacekeeping in Bosnia and the Sinai; and military operations other than war (MOOTW).

Three characteristics will dominate the transformational environment of the 21st century. One is that coalition warfare is here to stay. The chances of a nation going to war without a coalition of some kind is exceedingly unlikely, simply because the interdependence of so many entities in our world will continue to require consensus and allegiances. We have never before conceived this type of political-military mutualism. A great example is the events in Libya in which many countries provided selected support to the insurgents. Even the recent failed French rescue operation in Mali had U.S. support.

The second characteristic is the nature of the battlespace. Some consider warfare only to be conflict in which man fights man, resulting in a victor and the vanquished; a personal heroic contest. Not so in the new world of the 21st century. This new age already experienced the dawn of the drone; the increased use of the interagency as part of the whole of government approaches; and the use of civilians on the battlefield, not just to feed soldiers or unload ships, but to work side

by side with our warriors. As the new millennial world moves from the Industrial Age to the Information Age, the new battlespace called Cyber will become more and more critical. In this new battlespace, the objective may not be to kill the enemy or seize the terrain, but rather to disrupt infrastructure or deny the comfort of services as the “victory” of imposing political will. That becomes an intriguing facet when one considers the application of 21st century strategic Landpower.

The third and final dominant characteristic is the nature of command and control in this new age. We have already recognized the need for change in forming the notion of mission command. We will need to further refine that concept to meet a battlespace environment that moves faster than the environment in which it was conceived. What will be the criteria for a “first strike” in the Cyber world? How will the laws of armed conflict concerning acceptable justifications to engage in war (*jus ad bellum*) and the limits to acceptable wartime conduct (*jus in bello*) have to be modified? Who will make the call to employ forces and when? What authorities at what levels will make the decisions to employ or not to employ force?

We cannot afford to be idle in a world that moves so fast. If we are, the position of supremacy that we now enjoy may be overtaken by those more “Cyber savvy.” In this new age, hegemony may be determined by the nation who is more agile rather than the nation who has more traditional power.

In answer to this changing environment, we should look to a force in which Special Operations Forces, Conventional Forces, and Cyber Forces can work in an environment of interoperability, or mutualism. I suggest we harness a natural evolution of the brigade combat team (BCT) concept we now have and the multifunctional battalion suggested during the transformation of the Aviation Branch. Yes, it defies tradition, but so did the machine gun, the airplane, the tank, and the helicopter. These new mutualistic formations would still retain historical lineages but also be capable of developing competencies and proficiencies that are relevant and cost efficient.

COIN, true, is not a strategy but a tactic.[2] But it is also the beginning and not the end of a new era of 21st century warfare that will be marked by uncertainty. Our future is to deal with uncertainty and unconventional foes that use unconventional methods. We cannot afford to look backward, so it is critical that we resist that urge. We should continue to look forward at the changing environment rather than look at the world through the lens of the 1990s, for what we are seeing is not necessarily the end of “The Age of Petreaus,” but rather the beginning of “The Age of

Mutualism,” and the end to “The Age of Rumsfeld.”

Endnotes

1. Fred Kaplan, “The End of the Age of Petreaus,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 92, January/February 2013.

2. *Ibid.*

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